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Robin Jenkins: The Short Stories

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Robin Jenkins's short stories are collected in two books: *A Far Cry from Bowmore* (1973), set in the far east, in locations such as Malaysia, Afghanistan and Burma, and *Lunderston Tales* (1996), set in a small seaside town on the west coast of Scotland. This chapter begins by discussing ideas of distance and proximity in Jenkins's writing, showing how stylistically he brings together apparently 'objective' prose describing events 'externally' with more insidious and sly representations of 'subjective' or 'internally'-realised intimations of characters' motives, prejudices and dispositions. This allows him to explore the relations of difference and continuity between appearance and the deeper currents informing the actions of his characters. The chapter goes through each of the stories in both books, and considers one further story published independently, chronologically between each of the books' publication dates. The developing argument centres on the relation between 'realism' and the sense Jenkins's writing delivers that realism is not all there is. The unexpected twists in the narratives, the moral ambiguities and unreliable co-ordinate points experienced by many of the characters, the recurrence the inexplicable, make Jenkins's writing uniquely challenging and compelling in modern Scottish literature, and nowhere more evidently than in his short stories.

Keywords: Short stories, realism, irony, satire, morality.

The short stories of Robin Jenkins are collected in two books of great contrast: *A Far Cry from Bowmore* (1973), set in apparently exotic locations such as Borneo, Afghanistan and Malaysia, but often with immediately recognisable characters drawing on familiar Scottish 'types', and *Lunderston Tales* (1996), set in the implicitly familiar location of a small Scottish seaside town on the west coast, yet populated by a sometimes surprising cast of characters, who do unpredicted things.

They may be read as counterpoints, both typifying the ironies, reductive humour, sympathetic insight, and satirical disdain of Jenkins at his best, and both delivering a characteristic combination of intimate understanding and high, sometimes ambivalent, moral judgement. The stories in both books present domestic closeness and haughty objectivity, extremes between which Jenkins's writing veers and shifts with exhilarating command and consistently sharp focus.

These qualities of intimacy and distance are essential to his work and key elements in each of the stories. They involve engagement, sympathy and suspension of moral judgement, and then they demand equally a removal from close identification with individual characters, and the intrusion of ferocious objectivity and the capacity to make – or at least consider – absolute moral judgements. They are therefore poised, or rather negotiating, between conventions of nineteenth-century realism and twentieth-century, modernist forensic detachment. In this they have much in common with early

post-colonial or commonwealth fiction by, for example, Chinua Achebe and Ngugi wa Thiong'o. Arguably, this arises in part from Jenkins's early experience of Scotland, then from 1957 to 1968 as a teacher in Afghanistan, Spain and Borneo, and then of Scotland once again. Distance from, then reappraisal of, the familiar practice of English-language writing might help defamiliarise, and then reapply, linguistic conventions in that language, and deepen understanding of how it relates to literary and oral expression in other languages, whether Scots, Gaelic, Igbo or Kikuyu. There are therefore multiple contexts here in which the stories may be read: those of Scottish literature, of modernism, and of post-colonialism, and of the generic short story form.

Some qualities of narrative and idiom are dictated by the form itself. At the risk of stating the obvious, there are two essential qualities for any short story: it must be short, and it must be a story. To go a little further though, the classic examination of the form is in Walter Benjamin's essay, 'The Storyteller' (1936), which gives us two crucial, double distinctions: that between the story and the novel, and that between the storyteller who stays at home and gets to know everything about the locality he or she lives in, and the storyteller who travels the world and gets to know everything about other places and can compare and contrast them with the conventions and mores of home.¹ Jenkins partakes of each of these qualities. So does Lewis Grassie Gibbon. R.B. Cunningham Grahame before them would better exemplify the latter kind of storyteller and George Mackay Brown after them would exemplify the former kind.

As Benjamin reminds us, storytellers predate print, and stories predate novels, but one critical distinction of the Scottish tradition in fiction is that the greatest nineteenth-century Scottish novelists, Hogg, Scott, Galt and Stevenson, were keenly aware of – and to some extent simultaneously engaged with – both the oral as well as the print-bred literary arts of storytelling – and this legacy comes to Jenkins in particular ways. Indeed, there is a peculiar affinity in the unresolved ambiguities of the explanations of events suggested in Hogg's *Confessions of a Justified Sinner* (1824) with those suggested in Jenkins's 'A Far Cry from Bowmore', as we shall see. This might be described as 'a sense of supernatural or mystical grace' that may be a form of redemption, or may be a psychological self-deception, a source of fatal delusion. More generally, the ambiguous narrative, like the unreliable narrator, is familiar in Scottish fiction into the twenty-first century: Iain Banks's quasi-science fiction, quasi-realist novel, *Transition* (2009) begins with this sentence: 'Apparently, I am what is known as an Unreliable Narrator, though of course if you believe everything you're told you deserve whatever you get.'² The tone of that sentence is close to Jenkins in its relish of the act of vengeance upon the too-susceptible reader, the over-sympathetic engagement with characters whose come-uppance will be

¹ Walter Benjamin, 'The Storyteller', in *Illuminations*, ed. by Hannah Arendt, trans. by Harry Zorn (London: Pimlico, 1999), pp. 83-107.

² Iain Banks, *Transition* (London: Little, Brown, 2009), p. 1.

shocking, but leave you wondering how far your sympathy may have been warranted, and how much your judgement should have already been cutting in on your empathy.

There is a singular edge in Jenkins's style, honed over decades of writing and habitually resumed angles of approach, evident in both books of short stories: how the artifice of writing cuts deeply into the assumptions of reading along with, or seeing through the eyes of, his characters. We are always kept on this rather discomfiting edge, our natural sympathies balanced against the blade of Jenkins's scorn, his satiric disdain, his critical decisiveness. Again and again, he holds in close reserve his chosen moment of revelation.

In modern writing, this edge is what Hugh Kenner described as the 'Uncle Charles principle' in *Joyce's Voices* (1978). Kenner draws a crucial distinction between Charles Dickens and James Joyce. Kenner describes Dickens's writing in *Oliver Twist* (1838) as 'perpetually *judging*'.³ When Oliver says he wants more gruel, the master is described: 'a fat, healthy man' who 'turned very pale' and 'gazed in stupefied astonishment on the small rebel for some seconds, and then clung for support to the copper.' After exclaiming, 'What!' in a faint voice, he aims a blow at Oliver's head with the ladle. As we read we are chiefly aware of what Dickens is doing: 'ensuring by his sarcasms that no reader will miss the frigid hypocrisy of beadle and board, or the mad conviction of officialdom that a law of nature has been violated.'⁴ In *Madame Bovary* (1852), Gustave Flaubert achieves different effects. When the boy Charles Bovary is described being humiliated in a classroom when he drops his cap, he is described through the eyes of his fellow pupils, and later Mademoiselle Rouault is described through the eyes of Charles, who, Kenner says, 'as usual does not know what is happening to him.'⁵ This technique carries through to Joyce. The opening sentence of 'The Dead', from *Dubliners* (1914), is: 'Lily, the caretaker's daughter, was literally run off her feet.' The word 'literally' is inaccurately used (it should be 'figuratively') but it is idiomatically accurate to Lily. This is what she would say, not the objective narrator's description of her. Kenner's comment is: 'Description without knowledge is always potentially comic. It fails of intimacy with what is described. Being outside, it enacts a certain bafflement, as though it were a periphrasis for the intimate identifying word, such as Watch.'⁶ The 'Uncle Charles principle' for Kenner is that style which utilises the viewpoint and language of the character to create an intimacy from which the reader and author remain both aware and distanced, sympathetic and critical. The result may be both (or either) comic and (or) tragic. What determines that result lies mainly in the balance of sympathy or disdain. Jenkins manages this balance with sustained and often brilliant verve and *élan*.

³ Hugh Kenner, *Joyce's Voices* (London: Faber and Faber, 1978), p. 7.

⁴ Ibid.

⁵ Ibid., p. 8.

⁶ Ibid., p. 30.

When we come to Jenkins, then, the flat descriptions are in contrast with the nuance of sympathy, the precision of representation is given a tension and an urgency because of the imminence of judgement. And judgement, when it comes, can be fearfully fast and fatal. This is most poignantly expressed in the stories collected in *A Far Cry from Bowmore*.

The collection begins with 'Christian Justice' (first published in *The Penguin Book of Scottish Short Stories*, 1970). The title indicates clearly the irony that leans in on all the characters, as we accompany a married couple, teachers, Mr and Mrs Kishan, who take particular offence against a fellow-teacher, Mrs Kumar, and pursue their own prejudice to absurdly higher levels of authority and higher courts of appeal, to no avail. By the end of the story they are writing letters of complaint to the Prime Minister, to central government in Kuala Lumpur, and finally to the House of Lords in London. Mr Kishan tells his wife:

'That institution, you understand, is still the highest court of appeal in the Commonwealth.'

'Yes, my husband,' she said, quietly and proudly.⁷

This ever-aspiring list of courts of appeal mirror the quest at the heart of Jenkins's work, an aspiration towards sympathy that is grounded in an eternal, unbreakable connection between the failings and foibles of common humanity and our common human potential. There is no secure promise of fulfilment or appeasement because every promise can only be made in the understanding that the potential for fulfilment is common to humanity but without guarantee about what it may lead to. Every court of appeal has its own human failings. There is no assurance of ultimate justice in the human universe.

At the end of 'Imelda and the Miserly Scot' in *A Far Cry from Bowmore*, there is a stunning example of this. The story delivers a brilliant anatomisation of the miserly Scot, blatantly named Andrew McAndrick, a self-righteous, hypocritical, lascivious dentist in the Borneo town of Api (the word means 'fire'), who acquires the native Imelda as his mistress. 'Thrifty men are always devious of bargains' Jenkins warns us, but when Andrew sees 'this jewel of a woman among the frangipani bloddsoms' he snatches her up, having 'spiered, as they said in his native Scotland, and found that though they were all tormented by her beauty and her bedworthiness none had tasted her.'⁸ The emphatic use of the Scots word, the deployment of pomposities appropriate to McAndrick, the depiction of his lust and determination, all mingle apparent objectivities with descriptions of people and priorities from the point of view and in the language of the protagonist. We learn about Imelda's

⁷ Robin Jenkins, *A Far Cry from Bowmore* (London: Victor Gollancz, 1973), p. 25.

⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 32.

character from glimpses, mainly from McAndrick's perspective. We sense the threat she poses to him, while he remains in a state of acquisitive lust, psychological and cultural incomprehension, and we sense that he is fatally undervaluing her difference and potential threat. Jenkins implies there is danger in what she might do. The scrupulous delineation of McAndrick's preferences, habits, limited points of view, self-delusions, gives us just enough of Imelda for us, reading, to understand more than the central character. We know what McAndrick only nervously suspects: that he is in a place of increasing threatening violence. Our sympathies are tainted. We feel outrage at the way he treats her; yet we feel fearful for what she will do to him. We know that he deserves comeuppance, even retribution, but we sympathise with him precisely because he cannot comprehend his own predicament. We know it will end badly, and it does, when she spears him with a blowpipe, after running across the bedroom 'with a strange bounding action no doubt inherited from her ancestors used to hopping over logs and roots,' driving 'the sharp point past his Api Yacht Club tie, gold sails on a black ground, through his white shirt of finest Hong Kong cotton, and into his belly made, thirty-six years ago, in far-off Scotland.'⁹ The exaggerated patrician condescension in the observation McAndrick is apparently making about Imelda's ancestors is countered by the violence of her action. Even here, however, we need to judge carefully the balance between, or measured blend of, realism and design, sympathy and detachment, irony and despair. This story gives us a reality in two quite different but overlapping spheres of action. It is structured not only in a moral, social, cultural, or religious schema, but balanced on the edge of quality in the writing itself. This is a kind of realism, but it is not only that.

As Cairns Craig puts it, 'for Jenkins realism is what is left when ultimate meaning has been withdrawn from the world: it is the tragic stylistic condition which the modern novelist must both accept and resist at one and the same moment.'¹⁰ Craig argues that Jenkins is not part of a Scottish realist tradition: 'rather, he is, like Muriel Spark, a novelist of absolutes which defy the secular realities of the modern world.'¹¹ Where Spark found faith in Catholicism, Jenkins finds 'in belief itself only another potential hypocrisy.'¹² For both, though, Craig says, fiction is a medium through which it is possible (in Spark's words) to see 'another world than this.'¹³ Jenkins's 'stylistic condition' allows him to describe 'the real Scotland' (or 'real' and recognisable Scots outwith Scotland) but in testaments that show how insignificant 'the merely real' continues to be.

The title-character in 'Jeeva' is the daughter of a Professor of History at a college in Indonesia. She insists on giving alms to the city's beggars but at seventeen, with the imminent

⁹ Ibid., p. 64.

¹⁰ Cairns Craig, 'Robin Jenkins – A Would-Be Realist?' *Edinburgh Review*, 106 (2001), 12-22 (p. 22).

¹¹ Ibid.

¹² Ibid.

¹³ Ibid.

prospect of an arranged marriage, she is pressurised to end this practice of charity. She must swallow her pride and button down her independent spirit. The stage is set for a confrontation, a predictable rebellion of youth against convention but Jenkins pulls that expectation away dextrously, and ends the story with Jeeva looking forward to a marriage that ‘might be a challenge, not a whimpering, sweet-eating surrender.’¹⁴ Throughout, shifting perspectives, as we are made to look on people and events from the viewpoints of Jeeva, her father, mother, bridegroom-to-be and others, keep us unsettled. Similarly, the central character in ‘Siddiq’ finds himself pushed towards a destiny he had not wished for but discovers new ways of enacting revenge and reconciling himself to events. The story ends: ‘As Siddiq rode off towards the heart of the city, not really knowing where there was for him to go to, he felt that fate, like the radio, could not be controlled, however much you turned this knob or that.’¹⁵

‘A Far Cry from Bowmore’ is the central story in the collection and the most memorable. It begins as another pious, pompous, self-righteous Scot, Hugh Macpherson, sitting in an airport seeing off a church minister, gets a message from a passing doctor just arrived from the interior. Dr Willard tells Macpherson that far in the interior, another Scot named McArthur has asked to see Macpherson, as a last favour, as he is dying of cancer. Macpherson’s wife Mary and the minister Dougary, both Scots, urge him to go, but he is reluctant, not only because of the effort involved but because he is told McArthur has a native wife and two children: he does not approve of mixed marriage. The ‘fair-haired’ Mary asks him to go more than once (‘he’s one of us, Hugh, a Scotsman’ she says, and that ‘makes him closer to us’). Only when his engineering work prompts his journey part-way towards the dying man, and a further meeting with McArthur’s doctor, Dr Lall, does he consent to travel to see him. Dr Lall beseeches Macpherson when at first he refuses, calling him ‘a man without vision’: “‘If you do not go to hold that dying man’s hand, do you know what you will have done? You will have stopped the stars in their courses.’”¹⁶ Macpherson relents, and the encounter that brings the story to a culmination brings a multitude of contradictions together in a haunting and finally unresolved sense of mystery. When Macpherson meets Mrs McArthur and is shown the hospitality of their house, he is impressed by what seems a happy, domestic and balanced world. They must have been happy together, and this prompts reflection on his own marriage, his ideas about sexuality and the relation between individual self-determination and the laws of Christianity as he understands them. He finally meets the dying man, who, with his last words, says: “‘Your... wife’s... a... bonny... woman.’”¹⁷

What does this mean? It has been established that McArthur was from Islay and the Macphersons from Skye, and that they had met once, but only briefly. And it has been suggested that the McArthur house centres on a ‘great round room, like a church, panelled and floored with exotic

¹⁴ Robin Jenkins, *A Far Cry from Bowmore*, p. 94.

¹⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 133.

¹⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 153.

¹⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 165.

woods'.¹⁸ This seems reminiscent of the round church in Bowmore in Islay, said to be built round so that there were no corners for the devil to hide in. In the McArthurs' house, there are carvings, dancing figures, 'each with a severed head clutched to his breast' and yet it is lit by electricity and far from simply a pagan shrine. The crucial sentence of the story comes in Macpherson's realisation: 'Dimly he perceived that there were aspects and areas of faith that he had not known existed.'¹⁹

Macpherson finally acknowledges the support and affinity between the pagan shrieks and gongs filling the air outside with their noise to keep evil spirits away, and the New Testament in his own pocket and his understanding of the relation between the spiritual and the physical, the value of sympathy, the physical cost it comes at, and what is at stake, which is more than many other characters do, in Jenkins's fiction. As the story ends, McArthur dies, and the beating gongs outside suddenly become louder, leaving Macpherson bewildered: 'how had those beating the gongs known that McArthur was dead?' He touches his New Testament, 'not to counteract the pagan shrieks and gongs, but to assist them.' There is, it would seem, hope for us yet.²⁰

The last story in the book, 'Bonny Chung', set in Malaysia, returns us to a world similar to that of 'Imelda and the Miserly Scot', as a lascivious young teacher pursues various women, one of whom finally commits suicide and leaves him piously convincing himself of ways he might get over the situation and indeed turn it to his advantage in the future. Humanity is not redeemed, nothing is hopeful, the mix of cultures, appetites and aspirations promises nothing secure or restorative. A bleak vision closes the book, but the mystery enacted at the end of the title-story remains in the memory, understated, without emphasis, beautifully rendered in Jenkins's idiosyncratic and inimitable style.

One other story published mid-way between the two collections and set in Spain, Jenkins's other familiar locale in his novels, sums up key aspects of what we've been considering and should be noted: 'Exile', in *Modern Scottish Short Stories*, is a mere five pages long.²¹ A retired teacher, Miss Struthers, waits for the postman to bring letters from Scotland, sips sherry, remembers her neighbours and pupils back in Scotland, and has invited one of her former friends to visit for Easter. In the event, the letters delivered are from former pupils, remembering her affectionately, though not always in perfect grammatical sentences. There are more than twenty letters. 'Reading them, and re-reading them, would make exile no matter how long not only worth-while but also far easier to thole.' The story ends with that last, Scots, word, as if bearing the burden of her condition in the sherry-sipping

¹⁸ Ibid., p. 160.

¹⁹ Ibid., p. 162.

²⁰ Jenkins, *A Far Cry from Bowmore*, p.166.

²¹ Robin Jenkins, 'Exile', in *Modern Scottish Short Stories*, ed. by Fred Urquhart and Giles Gordon (London: Hamish Hamilton, 1978), pp. 140-44.

Spanish sunshine might be both truly a loss, but also, not so unbearable after all. The balance between or subtle blend of pathos and comedy is clear, beneath the lucid surface of the prose.

Lunderston Tales begins with a 'Foreword' that tells of a Scottish novelist's complaint that one of the disadvantages of living in Scotland was that 'nothing ever happened in it spectacular or exciting enough to be of interest to the rest of the world.'²² Referring to the sad result of the 1979 devolution referendum and the monotonous regularity of Scottish patriotism being only in evidence in the football stadiums, Jenkins says that nevertheless individual people are as interesting in Scotland as anywhere, and among the people of the small town he is introducing, there were 'individuals whose lives touched upon the great issues of our times and who represented the twentieth century as much as any inhabitants of New York or Moscow.'²³ This is a repudiation of parochialism. It is also an indication of how these tales will counterpoint those of the more exotic locations of his previous stories. Yet, empowered with the experience of life in other places, reading the local lives of Lunderston might exoticise them, not sensationalising but defamiliarising what otherwise might have seemed merely conventional. The irony and shrewd evaluations Jenkins brings to his writing, his characters and the favoured place, is an antidote to the habits of familiarity and comfort enacted in traditional 'kailyard' stories. There are no reliable, benevolent co-ordinate figures of minister or dominie. Nothing here can be taken for granted.

The very title of 'The Greengrocer and the Hero' juxtaposes the everyday smalltown shopkeeper and a mythic context. As with Joyce's Leopold Bloom, the opportunities are rich for both the reductive comedy of bathos and the understanding that heroism occurs in everyday, domestic circumstances. The story appears to be about a question of acknowledged paternity. When the Greengrocer's daughter Sadie has a son, the father, the feckless Gary, takes off for South Africa and becomes a mercenary; Sadie marries Rab Fairlie and they have five children as the years go by, while Gary's mother becomes a recluse. When Gary returns and meets the morally upright Greengrocer and town councillor, he refuses to accept any responsibility. The moral world described up to this point would seem to emphasise the hypocrisy of the 'hero' and the fortitude of Sadie's father, Jack Rankin, but when Jack confronts Gary's mother, he is shocked by her response:

'I'm Councillor Rankin, [...] Sadie's father. I've come to ask your son if he would like to meet his son, towards whose keep you have been contributing for the past eleven years. It may be his sense of humour or it could be that his recent experiences have deranged him, but he has denied paternity.'

²² Robin Jenkins, *Lunderston Tales* (Edinburgh: Polygon, 1996), p. ix.

²³ Ibid.

‘Does it matter,’ she asked contemptuously, ‘who your father is?’²⁴

And she turns and closes the door on him. He is left to ponder the question. All his assumptions about family, responsibility and social life are shocked by the question. He has failed in his mission to bring Gary back to a sense of conventional moral duty and his wife, daughter and grandson might complain about this, in one way or another: ‘Nevertheless he felt that he had succeeded in a way that he could never explain to anyone. He had been let into a secret.’²⁵ The shock of this rejection of familiar social morality is in itself exotic and forceful, and the unexpectedness of this new sense of uncertainty shocks not only Jack in the story but literary conventions of realism as well. The story enacts and delivers an unpredicted judgement. This is arguably the main stylistic technique and the major theme running through all Jenkins’s stories, and the novels as well. As Sadie’s mother, Annie, tells her: ‘Life’s like that [...] We want to gang doon one road, it sends us doon another.’²⁶

‘The Provost and the Queen’ exemplifies this as it looks over the entire career of John Golspie, the most notorious Provost in Lunderston’s history, who invited the Queen to open a new conference hall. The reactions of various conservative, nervous, superior, self-deprecating, arrogant or hostile characters are considered sweepingly before the visit of the reigning royals is described and Golspie’s transgression noted. He asks the monarch to sign two visitors’ books. When the townsfolk are disdainful and disparage him, he paints his house bright pink, but after his death, when the town’s relics are gathered in the burgh hall museum, the most revered item is Provost Golspie’s autograph album. The vicissitudes of public opinion, the power of office and the Provost’s strength of character are represented almost without comment. Jenkins’s attitude to the whole saga seems magisterial, reserved, neither amused nor indignant, but simply acknowledging how people are, what absurdities folk are capable of.

‘Don’t You Agree, Baby?’ addresses racism, hypocrisy and polite social manners, ending like ‘Jeeva’ not with a predictable confrontation but rather with an acceptance of challenge that might take the main characters beyond the confines of Lunderston. Different characters from different parts of the world at large come into Lunderston, and may leave it. Having dealt with racism, ‘The Merry Widow and the Elder’ introduces characters whose sexuality and appetite for the unpredicted demonstrate their willingness to engage each other in relationships at various levels of uncertainty. Sexuality in Lunderston, where the churches are ‘numerous and solid’ and worshippers ‘sedate and respectable’, is, despite appearances, ‘libertarian’.²⁷ The comic undertone is beautifully sly: ‘As for orthodox sex, the sort that most Lunderstonians practise, it is often indulged in for motives more

²⁴ Ibid., p. 24.

²⁵ Ibid.

²⁶ Ibid., p. 14.

²⁷ Ibid., p. 50.

subtle and human than the mere gratification of appetite.’ The ‘Merry Widow’ might bring the ‘Elder’ to realise his sexual potential, and thus she might gain something she would be glad ‘to thank the Lord’ for, praying for so long that ‘her knees began to ache, in spite of the thick carpet.’²⁸

Even less predictable shenanigans take place between the main characters in ‘Doreen and the Village Plumber’. Doreen’s husband arrives unexpectedly home and interrupts Doreen and Simon in bed together.²⁹ The juxtaposition of their behaviour with that of Simon is dry humour at its most arid, yet yields a final redemption: Simon ‘had been made man. He wouldn’t tell his friends about it, not just because his mother might get to know, but also because it was the kind of treasure you could keep to yourself without feeling selfish.’³⁰

‘The Locked Lavatories’ uses the narrative device of letters to the Editor of the *Lunderston Gazette* in an epistolary short story, so the questions of who the narrator is and how realism is maintained and of how judgements are delivered in the commentary that contextualises them are balanced and highlighted from the start. Similarly, restraint characterises ‘The Book Club’. Judgement is held back to the point of ambiguity. There is no Grand Guignol or melodramatic intervention but as the central character, Isabel, acknowledges in charity that poorly written books are not unforgivable, she maintains her dignity by refusing to behave like a character in one of them. Another subtle story of social subversion, ‘The Ladies’ Section’ charts the infiltration of women into the hitherto male preserve of the golf club. ‘The Consultant’ and ‘The Cabinet Minister and the Garbage Collector’ both probe around in questions of social class and the assumptions of superiority and inferiorism.

‘With a Tinge of Yellow’ mercilessly takes us with Robert Nairn, as he travels to America to see his daughter Cathie, now married to a black American sailor, with whom she has had a daughter. Nairn’s lustful racist thoughts about Cathie’s mother-in-law are repulsive, comic, but finally hopeless as he leaves them, pocketing a cheque to help with his own travel expenses. In the closing paragraphs, the ‘tinge of yellow’ might refer not to anyone’s skin colour but to the cowardice and abject motives of the story’s main character, which paradoxically yields a sense of pity, if not sympathy. Jenkins is marvellously deft in balancing and blending these aspects of the reader’s emotional engagement.

‘Goodbye, Phoenix Arizona’ takes us with Bella and Annie on an adventure from Lunderston to Las Vegas, and a marriage proposed and avoided in an instant cut of a deck of cards. ‘She Had to Laugh’ takes us with a young woman, a prostitute, into an arranged marriage and another far distant location, this time in California, as if to drive home the point that however much Lunderston might seem like the back of beyond, there are always other places even more so. Beyond the limitations of place, however, the resources of individual characters are where redemption, if at all possible, might

²⁸ Ibid., p. 70.

²⁹ Ibid., p. 83.

³⁰ Ibid., p. 85.

arise. Just as individuals are the sources of their own failings and unpredicted fate, so their capacities for devising new ways forward are celebrated, in Jenkins's work. At the end of the story, Tessa, the woman who has followed her road to the loneliest of American deserts and a world apparently bereft of the kind human company assured by at least some of Lunderston's folk, considers her own predicament: 'She went round to the back of the store, leaned against it, lit another cigarette, shivered a little, shaded her eyes against the brilliant sun, and laughed.'³¹

The journey Tessa makes universalises or internationalises the human story in Jenkins's work. It is Scottish writing but intrinsic to it are qualities of irony and understanding which locate it in a tradition of prose fiction which carries us from Hogg, Scott and Stevenson to Gray, Kelman and Kennedy, as much as from Dickens to Flaubert to Joyce, and in a way which sees it moving from the governing criteria of realism to a world of contingency and always only partial fulfilment.

Both Tessa's shivering and her laughter are essential responses to the world in Robin Jenkins's short stories, and his writing puts his characters, measuring scorn and compassion, under the most brilliant light, for both our moral judgement and our human sympathy.

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³¹ Ibid., p. 214.